

# **TESTIMONY**

**of**

**HOWIE DEWOLF**

**AMVETS NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTOR**

**before the**

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON BENEFITS**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**on**

**Cooperative Partnership of VBA and Veterans Service  
Organizations to Enhance Claims Processing**

Thursday, June 6, 2002,

10:00 a.m., Room 334

Cannon House Office Building

MR. CHAIRMAN, RANKING MEMBER REYES, AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

On behalf of National Commander Joseph W. Lipowski, I am pleased to present the comments of AMVETS on establishing a greater Veterans Service Organization (VSO) role in submitting more fully developed, ready-to-rate claims. Neither AMVETS nor I have been the recipient of any federal grants or contracts during the current fiscal year or the previous two years.

Mr. Chairman, AMVETS has been a leader since 1944 in helping to preserve the freedoms secured by America's Armed Forces. Today, our organization continues its proud tradition, providing not only support for veterans and the active military in procuring their earned entitlements but also an array of community services that enhance the quality of life for this nation's citizens.

Throughout our more than fifty year history, our focus and indeed our passion has been to represent the interests of veterans as their advocates. In this regard, you and our organization share a common purpose – we support veterans in their efforts to receive the benefits that a grateful nation intended them to have in recognition of their dedicated service to our country.

As a nation, we owe veterans an enormous debt of gratitude – for their service, their patriotism, and their sacrifices. The benefits to which they are legally entitled are not the product of some social welfare program, as some might argue. Rather they are yet another cost of freedom that unfortunately is too often forgotten.

As a national service organization, AMVETS is committed to assisting veterans in their times of need. For example, during the past sixteen years, we, together with DAV, PVA, and VFW, have co-authored a document titled *The Independent Budget* in which we identify the funding requirements necessary to support the Department of Veterans Affairs.

We believe that America's promises made to veterans for their military service need to be recognized and honored as our forebears intended. We believe that veteran's benefits should be provided in a timely and compassionate manner. We believe that to do less dishonors those whose service in defense of this nation provides a central underpinning for the prosperity and freedoms we all enjoy.

Over the years, AMVETS has maintained a proactive partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs, especially through the Veterans Benefits Administration. As veterans' advocates, we value both the professional and personal relationship that exists between us.

AMVETS also maintains a nationwide cadre of National Service Officers co-located in many instances with the VA at various regional offices and with some NSOs assigned at or near military installations to assist with Transition Assistance. This cadre of men and women—each and every one of them a veteran—assists veterans in processing their compensation claims with the Department of Veterans Affairs. We devote a considerable amount of resources to ensuring our NSOs have the necessary tools and training to perform their tasks professionally and in a timely manner.

The AMVETS organization has enthusiastically joined with the Department of Veterans Affairs in its attempt to develop a partnership with the Veterans Service Organization community. We fully acknowledge the importance of the issues raised in the report of the VA Claims Processing Task Force.

For a number of years, it has been the policy of the AMVETS National Service Department to ensure that our National Service Officers submit well-grounded claims on behalf of veterans. We have emphasized the importance of guiding veterans towards gathering the proper evidence and ensuring their claims submission is as complete as possible.

Rather than contribute to the claims backlog by knowingly submitting an incomplete or frivolous claim, we would prefer to tell the veteran the truth so that we do not build unrealistic expectations. To the best of our ability, we intend to be part of the solution in processing veterans' claims in a timely manner, not part of the problem.

We have found that our diligence has paid significant benefits to the veterans whom we serve. The feedback we receive from Regional Office Directors is consistently positive with respect to the completeness of our claims work. Veterans are pleased that once their claims are filed they have no further action other than to wait for their rating results.

Similarly, we have actively participated with the VA in implementing its TRIP—Training, Responsibility and Involvement in Preparation of Claims—program. We have met monthly with our VA counterparts and other cooperating VSOs to develop the program, monitor training schedules, discuss implementation issues, and ensure a partnership is fostered between the VA and the VSO communities.

AMVETS has directed its NSOs to take the TRIP training, become certified, and actively engage with their VA counterparts at their respective Regional Offices. Additionally, we have also established a program where accreditation as a service organization representative of AMVETS is contingent upon successful completion of TRIP training. Essentially, we have established a one-year probationary period for a county or state service officer seeking accreditation with AMVETS to successfully complete TRIP training.

Unfortunately, although the VA has developed the TRIP training program and we have enthusiastically participated, we have yet to see the benefit. Our NSO submissions are treated no differently than any other claim received by the VA, whether processed under TRIP or not. We were told that the claims our TRIP-trained service officers submitted would be processed more rapidly and, for the sake of the veterans we serve, be given a rating more rapidly. This has not been the case.

Across the country, our National Service Officers report that the claims they submit receive no priority over any others. Without exception, all claims appear to go into the same queue without regard to whether they had been processed by a TRIP-trained service officer or not. Our chagrin is that we feel we have held up to our side of the partnership but the VA is not delivering on theirs. Our NSOs take the training and pass the tests, but see no benefit for the veterans they are trying to serve.

If we keep up our end of the Partnership, ensure our NSOs are TRIP-trained, and submit fully developed claims that are “ready-for-development,” then the VA needs to carry through on its end of the Partnership by giving priority consideration to those claims.

AMVETS has fully and enthusiastically committed to a partnership with the VA. We want to work together with the VA to ensure that we achieve the ultimate goal of better serving America’s veterans.

AMVETS looks forward to working with you and others in Congress to ensure we help meet the needs of America’s veterans and their families. Clearly there is much to do, and we are encouraged in seeing your personal involvement in the consideration of changes in policy that will help ease a massive, chronic backlog of pending benefit claims.

This concludes my statement. I would be pleased to address any questions or comments that you or other members of the panel may have and thank you, again, for the opportunity to present our remarks.